MORE THAN NOISE: The Integrated Soundtrack of Noise

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Abstract

Conventional discourses accounting for film music’s subordination and the vertical stratification of image, sound and music have been superseded by more integrated and complex scoring approaches. Contemporary Australian films utilising a hybridised or interdisciplinary approach and, influenced by new technologies and media, adopt a more unified method of ‘sounding’ their narratives. Analysing Matthew Saville’s Noise (2007), this article will highlight the operation of sound and music in relation to the film’s principal themes, exposing the complex machinations of the film’s auditory components. It will discuss these complexities with particular reference to the new perspective they provide to the film noir genre.

Keywords

Australian film, film noir, film music, sound design, Noise

Introduction

Contemporary Australian feature films have been welcomed ambivalently. New cinematic product often meets with, on the one hand, poor box office success while, on the other hand, domestic and international critical acclaim. Australian films attracting such acclaim such as Chopper (Andrew Dominick, 2000), Somersault (Cate Shortland, 2004), The Proposition (John Hillcoat, 2005) and Noise (Matthew Saville, 2007) share a common bond, namely, a sonically sophisticated approach to narrative development and the film text. However, the narratives of some more experimental feature films of the Australian cinema industry may discomfort audiences and create consternation for marketing personnel, thereby affecting box office. Narrated in unique styles and frequently with a significant emphasis on sound components, these films encounter difficulties competing with products with more easily accessible themes and approaches.

As the first decade of the new millennium closes, it is apparent that conventional attitudes towards film music – the orchestral score and all that it now encompasses – have been replaced by a more dynamic and integrated approach to the music track. Generally, such an approach accounts for those nuances of the film sound language (foley, sound effects, atmospheres, dialogue) that have been in one way or another integrated within a film’s soundtrack. In fact the ascendancy of a cohort of
auditory artists – since the 1970s termed ‘sound designers’\(^1\) – demonstrates the increasing flexibility placed upon music and score, and inevitably its relationship with sound and image. Connoting a more artistic, aesthetically driven approach to ‘sculpting’ or ‘designing’ sound and music with image, these individuals have benefitted from advances in technology and created an environment through which to view those elements of film traditionally considered by authors such as Thomas Elsaesser\(^2\) as an emotional or spectacular excess.

Aligned with this shift are perceptions of film music that embrace integration. The music track now more or less readily accommodates both original score and pre-recorded songs or instrumental items. A new framework that considers the integration of music within sound and sound with image is required, a stark opposition to more traditional frameworks that have typically stratified music or relegated it to the background (see Adorno and Eisler, 1994; Gorbman, 1987). In this way, one can recognise music as an organic property of film; as one of the many sound components employed on contemporary films.

Fittingly, as a new approach to film scoring, these practices have found a comfortable niche in the typically ‘arthouse’ style of many contemporary Australian films. ‘Arthouse’ films are usually characterised by the interplay between audiences finding meaning in image and an auteurist vision. Such a style breaks down connections between sequences and montages in part through music to enhance the philosophical meaning of images. Here music works both conceptually (metaphorically) and aesthetically (stylistically) to ‘sound’ the narrative. Thus, music serves to enhance the meaning generally conveyed via image, rather than conventionally relying on image for continuity and relevance. In Matthew Saville’s \(\textit{Noise}\), for example, music and sound are integrated consciously in what can be seen as a modern Australian take on the film noir genre. The interplay between these two sound components becomes the auditory cornerstone of the film. By analysing the use of sound and music in \(\textit{Noise}\), this article will account for the shift in scoring approaches. It will suggest a ‘horizontal’ framework through which to understand the operation of film music. In doing so, it will discuss \(\textit{Noise}\) in the context of a more integrated framework demonstrating the relationship between music and other sound components. This will illustrate the ascendancy of music and sound in contemporary Australian films and its specific role in providing a new perspective on the film noir genre. Furthermore, it will demonstrate the nuances of this framework and its subsequent relationship to highlight and reveal the core meanings of the film.

Cinema Sound/Music Framework

Academic writing on film music theory has covered many aspects of the histories and complexities of film music theory and practice, from the ‘silent’ cinema era to the new millennial period. This is not to say, however, that it has become a static field of research.\(^3\) As time progresses significant contentions shape and re-shape our understanding of film music, and original and dynamic films will continue to do so. Such is the relevance of a new horizontal framework. Furthermore, the

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\(^1\) It is generally recognised that the term sound designer was first employed by Francis Ford Coppola as a designation for the work by Walter Murch on \(\textit{Apocalypse Now}\) (1979) that involved all aspects of the film’s audio track including dialogue and sound effects through to re-recording in the post-production mixing. See Coppola, 2002: 53.

\(^2\) See Elsaesser’s work on excess and melodrama in Elsaesser, 1985: 165.

\(^3\) As evidenced by the volume of film music and sound books now available from several publishers and the introduction of three new journals in the field in the last decade.
ascendancy of sound and music in film operate differently in this digital age as production practices and processes change with non-destructive editing and mixing. Post-structuralist styles of analysis, established primarily by Elsaesser and extended by Caryl Flinn (1992), Rick Altman et al. (2000) and most recently Wendy Everett (2008), demonstrate the way in which music in American melodramas of the 1960s ‘open up’ sites for the mental projection of ‘imagery’. This imagery allows for an idealised, psychoanalytical perspective. This process, with the benefit of hindsight, recalls socio-cultural mythology to illustrate the way in which so-called excessive filmic structures (such as music) assist in reflecting external social tensions within private emotional contexts. For instance, in her analysis of Max Steiner’s ‘Tara’s theme’ in Gone with the Wind (Victor Fleming, 1939), Everett notes its role in introjecting Southern mythologies, romantic obsessions and epic themes.

While analysis of film sound and music has tended to assert that historical practices traditionally limited the role of sound and music, Altman identified a significant gap in research. Early writings, particularly by Theodore Adorno and Hans Eisler, tended to focus on ‘single-component studies’ or filmic uses of particular sound elements: dubbing, effects, the voice and voiceover, to name a few. Significantly Altman, with McGraw Jones and Sonia Tatroe, opened up a space through which to understand the relationships among soundtrack components. Their term “mise-en-bande” (2000: 341), meaning the interaction of sound components on the sound track, recognises the need to develop a language for sound track analysis that is as competent as our highly organised image referent system. However this method remains relatively diagrammatic and focuses on a period of early Hollywood synchronised sound films that is frequently analysed, the revelations of which seem to confirm “the awkwardness of early sound handling” (Altman et al, 2000: 351).

Without detracting from this seminal research, such a retrospective, or, to use the ominous term ‘nostalgia’, approach simply perpetuates the notion that sound in early cinema was riddled with practical and technical difficulties. Applying this system to contemporary films can reveal the way in which auditory artists have developed new, innovative and highly complex ways to balance the sound/music/image triptych, reducing the conventional focus on image alone. For when Everett suggests that the ascendancy of music has registered “a change of voice, an indication of film’s adoption of a contrapuntal structure” she still believes that “music, as signifier, cannot ‘mean’ directly. It can only connote or infer” (2008: 13). However, in contemporary films, providing greater ascendancy to their aural structure, sound and music appear as a parallel with image, existing interdependently. The combination of sound, music and image operate together to provide a multi-dimensional text, unable to be separated without altering or threatening the fabric of the film and film viewing experience.

As such a more appropriate framework through which to understand the interrelationship of different sound elements needs to be established. A horizontal approach to these three elements (imagine music, sound and image scattered across the broad spectrum of filmic structures as opposed to hierarchically subjugating them) is perhaps a more constructive method insofar as it enables an understanding of the unique yet interwoven position each holds in relation to the other. This framework assists an awareness of film flow (and time/duration aspects), and an understanding of the contribution of all elements to narrative. Guiding the development of this new approach is Martin Miller Marks’s contention that, in sound cinema,
There is no repertoire of ‘pieces of film music’ at all – only pieces of film…
The primary material of film music, both for the audience and the researcher, is not a recording or a score but the film itself. (Marks, 1997: 4)

Such an observation accounts for the fact that materially, film is usually experienced as a whole. Additionally, this characteristic provides a succinct metaphor for contemporary ways of receiving the sound/music/image relationship. In the case of Noise, sound and music renegotiate the ‘prejudice of the iconic’ in relation to film noir. Despite other sound related reliances such as the voiceover or jazz music, film noir is essentially a visual genre, epitomised by the act of looking and – more so – seeing, detecting or uncovering. In Noise, what results is notably complex: a film whose primary concern for both the protagonists and the viewer is hearing the unheard.

Hearing Noise

Set in suburban Melbourne, southeast Australia, Noise is a story of suburban tragedy told with a distinctly Australian sentiment. The narrative is centred on Graham McGahan (Brendan Cowell), an ‘ordinary cop’ suffering tinnitus and the possibility of cancer. With dubious concern for his health or wellbeing, he is removed from duty and relegated to a mobile detective caravan in a suburb recently shocked by a series of gruesome murders. McGahan, disillusioned with himself and his choices in life, is at first unwilling to engage with concerned individuals of the community but eventually finds some solace in the assistance his posting brings. However, as the film progresses, it becomes apparent that everyone has a story. Ultimately, McGahan’s self-centredness coupled with the symptoms of his affliction confuses the investigation of the case and obscures his ability to distinguish between those members of the community who wish to help and those who mean to hinder. Heard/unheard elements thereby operate on several diegetic and extra-diegetic levels.

From the outset Noise appears to be an archetypal film noir showcasing a nocturnal urban landscape and an unsolvable murder in the city. The opening shot depicts the silhouetted Melbourne cityscape against an eerie piano theme, accompanied by an airy ambient soundscape. The music, becoming softer, merges with the crescendo of the grinding steel of a train as it echoes through a network of fluorecently-lit tunnels. Here we are introduced to Lavinia Smart (Maia Thomas) walking towards her train, the distorted and compressed treble of techno music only just audible through her headphones. At first oblivious to her surroundings, she sits, gently swaying aboard the train. Yet, as she gradually becomes conscious, what surrounds her is a grisly revelation. At the same time we find McGahan on a routine check of a station, his police radio emitting distorted vocal fragments. “Sorry I’m in a tunnel and my battery’s cactus!” McGahan exclaims in response to his partner’s calls to him. Exiting via the escalator his partner yells to him again, almost sub-audibly: “Can’t you hear?” an expression that inevitably becomes a focus of the film. At this point the image becomes bouncy and distorted as a kind of static or white noise fuses with the rattling escalator and McGahan collapses, head first, on the floor.

Such is the confusion of the world we find in Noise. This opening sequence provides a succinct introduction to the fallibility, faults and frailty of humans in

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*Although today’s digital viewing facilities (particularly DVD home theatres) provide innumerable ways to ‘view’ films.*
contemporary society amidst the ‘atmospheric disturbance’ of everyday life. It highlights miscommunication and a lack of personal connection. Essentially, the polyphony of the narrative draws together disparate characters and events through the shared experience of disassociation and grief. Underlying this severance, however, are the fundamental relationships that are forged and the acts of heroism that prevail, delivering glimmers of hope amidst the darkness of humanity. Essentially this theme of connection/disconnection foregrounds much of the complex philosophical musings that become the crux of the narrative.

Essentially, the polyphonic narrative is evoked by the sound/music dynamic provided by original music composer Bryony Marks and sound designer Emma Bortignon who collaborated closely “to blur the lines between ‘the music’ and ‘the sound’” (Marks, in Saville, 2007: unpaginated). The two elements at once synergise and compete as a reflection of the narrative. Marks recalls that,

We wanted [the music] to merge seamlessly with the sound design in magnifying the horror of chronic tinnitus... and most importantly, we wanted it to link disparate characters and events, to show that, while they each live out their own, small lives, they are bound by a world with its own terrible and wonderful, random and relentless rhythms. We feel that if we achieved this sense of an abstract, elemental force at work, then the characters’ struggle towards decency would resonate. (ibid)

Generally, film noir, extending the conventions of melodrama, utilises music for its spectacular value, introjecting an “odd, unsettling quality” (Flinn, 1992: 114). In Noise, however, music and sound possess a more integrated presence. Rather than simply ‘lending to’ the nihilistic mood, evoking the seedy underbelly of the interstitial metropolis or commenting ironically on tragic events, the combined use of ambience, noise and orchestral music take an active role in mediating the narrative. What results is a deeper kind of psychological engagement that obscures McGahan’s subjectivity as he performs his investigation.

Furthermore, the music and sound of Noise lend spatially to the claustrophobia of suburban Melbourne (filmed for the most part at night) and the cramped space of the police caravan where McGahan is located. Writing on the spaces of modernity in film noir, Edward Dimenberg suggests that,

The metropolis portrayed in the film noir cycle seldom appears defamiliarized or re-enchanted, a space of genuinely enhanced freedom and possibility. Instead, it hyperbolically presents the contrasts and rhythms of the city (including music and sound) as elements of a highly rationalized and alienating system of exploitative drudgery permitting few possibilities of escape. (2004: 14)

Such hyperbole is reminiscent of the ‘conceits’ that not only appear in much of noir dialogue but in the complex labyrinthine structure of the cityscape. Back alleys, sewers and neon bars act as Dalian metaphors for the Freudian subconscious and for the most part music assists in evoking the urban ‘rhythms’ that, as Marks recalls, connect disparate characters and events. Nevertheless, given the suburban

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5 Described by Saville as being intentionally ‘prosaic’ (Noise press kit, 2007).
6 See for instance Naremore’s discussion of Chinatown (Polanski, 1974) and David Lynch’s Mulholland Dr. (Lynch, 2001) in Naremore, 2008: 36, 61, 209.
7 For a review of the geography of the subconscious space in film noir, see Dyer (1977).
locale, Saville has chosen to focus these metaphors around the police caravan that physically entraps McGahan. Interestingly, David Clarke refers to film noir’s role in extending the process by which “Hollywood fictions codify social conflicts in individualistic terms, by grounding its logic of character and action in the protocols of popularised psychoanalysis” (1997: 91). This explicitly recalls Elsaesser’s analysis of music in melodrama where the private/public, individual/social dichotomies are exploited by music to reflect tensions in the realm of the narrative. In *Noise*, sound and music work to recode social conflicts and existential insights in individualistic terms (seen in McGahan’s personal development). This is particularly evident in the interplay between music and the ‘sound’ of tinnitus. However, it is in this interplay that music becomes a part of the broader spectrum of filmic structures, not always distinguished against the random and relentless rhythms of the film.

In this sense, music does not simply provide dramatic excess or amplify mood. Rather it becomes another intricacy of the city: a feature of (sub)urban and, more so, psychological decay that is ostensibly overlayed, yet comes to be experienced as an organic product of the diegesis. For instance, the straining strings and rumbling cello that often accompany scenes featuring some type of kinetic chaos (for example the lengthy, meandering shot of a Senior Detective arriving at the scene of the murders on the train) not only dramatise the narrative but in many respects highlight the latent ‘noise’ of tinnitus that seems to disturb our experience of the film. As such, the stylised, nocturnal imagery of *Noise* acts as an expression or externalisation of the ‘terror within’ that is reinforced by the tension introjected by the score: the interplay between the film’s music and the sound design is essential to the film. More specifically the sound dimension of tinnitus operates as a hyperbolic evocation of the everyday noise “that clutters up the understanding of events and motivations and other people” (McFarlane, 2007: 34-5). Therefore, the score plays an active role in ‘sounding’ the cityscape and evoking the protagonist’s subjectivity by self-reflexively ‘cluttering’ the narrative for the viewer.

“A Reflection Of Itself”: Music In *Noise*

The presence of music within the diegesis is cleverly revealed in the dialogue of *Noise*. Halfway through the film Caitlin (Katie Wall), McGahan’s girlfriend, attempts to soothe the irritation of his tinnitus as she cradles him in her lap. She observes that, just as “every colour has an opposite… every note has an opposite, every sound has a reflection of itself and they cancel themselves out”. Considering that on many occasions the musical score is almost inaudible or unrecognisable when combined with the high pitched ringing of McGahan’s tinnitus, it can certainly be argued that music is another feature of the soundscape, as important as the other sound components working with the image track. Characterised by an orchestral swelling of predominantly piano and strings, the reliance on music to affect mood becomes somewhat irrelevant. Instead, music is utilised to reflect concepts that are being played out at a thematic level.

The orchestral (or ‘classical’) music has particular significance in arthouse cinema. Russell Lack acknowledges this, suggesting that,

...rather than be polemically directed by a loaded sequence of montages...’arthouse’ cinema has its audiences engaged in solving a puzzle themselves in concert with the film’s unfolding. Cinematic images no longer represent the world, but rather rethink the world according to
the auteurist director’s own philosophical beliefs and concepts. (1997: 297)

Importantly, Lack goes on to suggest that, classical music, like film or poetry, encodes subjective or existential experiences of life and being into another, ‘readable’ form using the language or devices relevant to that specific discipline. As such he argues that classical music in these ‘arthouse’ films is often employed to recreate “attitudes of existentialism” (Lack: 298). While the classical music examples Lack discusses are largely pre-existing and ones that carry prior cultural resonances, the original score of Noise functions in a similar manner.

As has been argued, music in Noise provides a counterpoint for McGahan’s tinnitus and a reflection of this ambience or noise, with the two sonic components in constant conflict with each other. In this way the musical score adopts an active role within the film, as well as serving to highlight and intensify moments of tension (particularly Lavinia’s collapse on the train after having been confronted by the mysterious gunman, or the revenge attack on a local disabled community member, ‘Lucky Phil’). Music becomes integrated into the soundscape and provides an aural divergence that is intertwined with the image and sound within the realm of the diegesis. Moreover, when music serves a coherent function in relation to the narrative and images on screen, it establishes a sense of irony, increasing narrative tension but also evoking existential concerns pertinent to the film.

Ultimately, the musical score of Noise assumes this ironic pretext to highlight the existential and philosophical elements of the film. This is prominent in the final sequence in which McGahan, confined to his caravan to celebrate Christmas and watching Caitlin as a member of the orchestra at a televised Christmas Carols performance (Fig 1), is attacked by an irate antagonist, Craig Finlay. A local who expresses ‘interest’ in the murder case, Finlay has constantly taunted McGahan to engage in some type of violent action and this inevitably results in a standoff. With a shotgun, Finlay blasts holes through the walls of McGahan’s makeshift office; all the while the soft harmony of the Christmas carols from the old television set ironically frames the sequence. While McGahan fumbles for his gun to retaliate, the sound of heavy breathing over a brief interlude between carols tightens the tension. Now the gunfight moves outside where McGahan is hit in the back from a pistol shot. Strangely, compared to the rest of the film and amidst the confusion, we are
not exposed to the ringing of the tinnitus.\footnote{Although McGahan does appear to experience ringing, particularly as he tries to hum the note G-flat as Caitlin has suggested.} Instead, the ‘tinny’ carols emanating from the small television provide a sense of clarity for the viewer, a contrast to the auditory convolution that sound and music have played throughout the film.

The television, or more specifically, the music from the television (which assists in dissolving or blurring our perception of the diegesis), provides a disturbing clarity to the final sequence in a manner usually only achieved by silence. Attempting to shoot McGahan, Finlay accidentally fires a shot into the windscreen of a passing car, causing it to veer off the road and into a power pole. Reminiscent of Chinatown (Polanski, 1974), the crashed vehicle emits a blasting horn noise and a baby on the back seat begins to scream. McGahan then struggles to reload his gun before taking a clean shot at Finlay. At this point an audio dissolve – a technique blurring the boundaries of the diegesis – absorbs the televised carols and a non-diegetic orchestra that begins to accompany the choir, and the film soundtrack swells to a crescendo. McGahan stumbles to the car where the baby lies before collapsing onto the road. Here diegetic sound is dissolved almost completely as a wash of music, dialogue and sound effects place the viewer in the perspective of the wounded McGahan. As he lies there, a montage of shots between a police car with Lavinia in the back (radios exclaiming “officer down”) and Caitlin on the television inside, precedes the overwhelming high volume arrival of a police helicopter. A point of view shot shows the helicopter hovering over McGahan, its searchlight beaming down on his dying body before a final cut to a long shot of the street scene, where the high pitch frequency of tinnitus slowly builds before darkness and an elongated silence.

This dramatic and affecting sequence demonstrates how music and sound play a critical role in the structuring of the film. As has been suggested, the interplay between sound and music contributes significantly to the film’s poetic and meditative nature, positioning the film as a type of contemplation for the viewer. Quite literally the film can be seen as a visual construction of its score, both kinetically (in the ‘movement’ or progression of the narrative) as well as sonically.

Building gradually, the film swells and pulses, receding in areas, before coming to a loud and triumphant conclusion, a sequence that is ironically set to the diegetic sound of the television resounding the peace and joy themes of the Christmas carols. The distinct combination of music and sound creates this effect, serving as a metaphor for its auteuristic style of auditory practice. This is a sophisticated, technical approach to film scoring. Mapped against the mise-en-bande model used by Altman (2000) in his analysis of sound components and their relation to image, it is clear that music has dramatic effect in relation to the narrative arc. Rather than simply accentuating the development of the drama, music and sound play an active role in cluttering the narrative, obscuring a clear perception of the film at critical points. Instead of providing a type of emotional ‘guide’ to the narrative, music and sound engage the viewer in the psychology of our fallible protagonist Graham McGahan. Moreover, they contribute to the density of the film and its polyphonic sensibilities.

As the film’s title suggests, Noise can be understood to subjugate the act of seeing. For instance, much of the film is set in the caravan, at night under harsh halogen lights or in poorly lit streets. Such visual deprivation emphasises that hearing, or the ability to hear, is of primary importance. Composer Bryony Marks recognised
this in her approach to the score, stating that listening is central to the premise of the film (Saville, 2007). A striking technique, this can be interpreted as a conceptual counterpoint to the use of sight and seeing in Nicholas Roeg’s Don’t Look Now (1973) where the disparities between vision and blindness (metaphors for death and foresight) come to represent for the audience the importance placed on the metaphysical act of seeing in film. In Noise what the audience hears or cannot hear – or rather, what the director wants the audience to hear – enhances the enigma. Sound and music enshroud the narrative in mystery and only when we can divorce ourselves from its overwhelming presence and decode its density can we comprehend the tragedy of the narrative. This is a crucial recognition, given that conventionally our reception of cinema is established visually, particularly in melodrama or film noir where the spectacle relies on the phenomenon of scopophilia or the gaze. Therefore, one can surmise that Noise is engaging the act of hearing on the same intellectual level as the eye, confirming the engagement of music, sound and image in this contemporary Australian film.

“Can’t You Hear?”: Aural Assault in Noise

In Noise, tinnitus replaces a more recognisable film noir device, namely, the voiceover narration. In classic film noir features from as early as the 1930s and 40s, voiceover is often responsible for revealing, with hindsight, only so much as will be required to hold the attention of the audience. It provides tension and clarity but, at the same time, misdirection, allowing us to sympathise with the foibles of the protagonist. In Noise, tinnitus takes on this role, effectively ‘suturing’ the audience into the world of the narrative as well as, albeit indirectly, providing McGahan with a ‘super-human’ ability to decide between right and wrong. The ‘good cop lured astray’ motif is reversed through the presence of tinnitus and McGahan, an ordinary self-centred human being, is set on the path of righteousness by his affliction. The ‘noise’ of tinnitus, then, is essentially the cornerstone to the film. Just as music tones and colours the film, this noise mediates not only the narrative but the viewer’s ability to interpret its meaning and “to understand the everyday struggle humans face to remain good” (Saville, 2007).

Commonly found in film noir, the fallibility of the protagonist is central to the narrative. McGahan’s affliction obscures his role as a detective, yet provides him with a type of sacrificial redemption. Caryl Flinn suggests that the power of music or the ability to hear in film noir often provides characters with a kind of magical vision. This ‘miraculous’ power usually equates to a character’s creative abilities, the power of redemption or an “epistemological insight” (1992: 114). In Noise McGahan’s tinnitus (his inability to hear clearly) ironically delivers him a type of redemption as well as what can be considered a ‘special sight’. His physical deterioration – the ringing in his ears and the possibility of cancer – forces him to reassess his choices in life, his relationships with others and his ultimate ‘judgement’, as it were, should his time come. His final choice, whether conscious or not, is noble: to protect others at his own expense. Ultimately in Noise (depending on one’s interpretation of the ending), McGahan and his nemesis Finlay are responsible for erasing each other; the binaries of good and evil cancelling each other out. This is distinctly reminiscent of Caitlin’s attempts to soothe the ringing of McGahan’s tinnitus by humming its reflection: a G-Flat note. While Saville has attempted to avoid diametric clichés, preferring to allow the script to “invite us to vest faith in fractured characters” (2007), yet, on a philosophical level, McGahan overcoming Finlay is essentially an everyday victory in the constant struggle against adversity and those forces that will us to evil. In this manner, traces of
binary oppositions, such as good and evil, heaven and hell (and Christian themes) remain prevalent in _Noise_. Underscoring these elements is the interplay between music and other aural components of the film in an attempt to clarify, as it eventually does for McGahan, the meaning of the complexities of this philosophical meditation.

Music has often played a critical role in dictating or providing clarity to emotional subjectivity in cinema. In _Noise_ however, music has a more complex function. Marks’s sombre orchestral score, featuring long, strained string sections of viola, cello and double bass, is for the most part fused with an omnipresent collage of ambient sound and sound FX. This is coupled with a high frequency and static distortion as the manifestation of McGahan’s tinnitus. The resulting ubiquitous ‘noise’ plays a critical role in evoking McGahan’s subjectivity as well as mediating actively the protagonist’s (and more so our own) perceptions of the violence, the murders and the culprit. For instance, quite early in the film, McGahan, becoming increasingly frustrated by the identified “ringing” in his ears, rushes around his home turning on whatever appliances are at hand: radios, stoves, ovens, stereos, showers, fans, record tables and, more importantly, a television set that he tunes to static in a futile attempt to ‘drown out’ the internal noise. Instead, what results is an excruciatingly ‘noisy’ sequence, far louder than much of the film and a direct contrast to much of the whispered dialogue, particularly between McGahan and Caitlin. The high volume of this sequence shocks the viewer into the realm of the diegesis, allowing for a direct engagement with this sensorial experience. McGahan’s inability to hear clearly in important situations becomes that of the viewer and shapes the way we experience the film subconsciously. Furthermore, acting as a concise example of the operation of sound and even dialogue throughout the film – sometimes remaining unnoticed, mumbled or sub-audible – the resulting ambiguity accentuates characters’ constant frustration with one another, as they interrogate each other with, “Did you hear that?!,” “are you a good listener?,” “what, are you deaf?”.

The inability to hear (or to be deaf) that _Noise_ posits is more fallible than the inability to see. To hear or to listen is to sympathise, to empathise with a fellow human being. As in the story of Babel whose inhabitants were cast across the face of the Earth for their pride and cursed with the burden of language, modern Melbourne comes to represent the contemporary noir citadel whose many cultures, egotisms and intolerances sever human communication and connection. This is particularly evident in the ineffectual use of terms such as “fuckwit” which, although delivered with gusto, McGahan notices to be the only put-down that people can summon to express the discontent, anger, fear and paranoia that each of the characters feel towards each other. As McGahan begins to understand, listening or hearing one another is central to repairing these inter-personal connections and, as such, could perhaps be the key to empathy, to humanity.

Reparation, however, is particularly complex in the contemporary urban space. Georg Simmel argues socialisation requires the development of a “calculated indifference” to those ‘others’ who litter the streets and public transport (in Dimendberg, 2004: 22). This indifference appears in _Noise_ in a sonic form, for instance, at the start of the film via the image and sound of the headphones Lavinia wears as she boards the train. Simmel also argues that ‘detection’ involves the awareness of the ‘stranger’, of the outsider who poses an ambiguous threat to society. Such is McGahan’s role in manning the caravan: to detect and report, to listen, “to sit here and put down whatever the mouth-breathers say or do”, as Rhonda Harris instructs. Reluctant to ‘spy’ on the community at first, McGahan
eventually finds solace in the assistance he provides to the suburb and its eccentric inhabitants. The culmination of this occurs after a lengthy monologue detailing his ‘scientifically supported’ philosophy on eternity, when Lucky Phil is attacked. McGahan’s tinnitus, however, ironically obscures his ability to perform the required detection, and (in typical noir style) such is the fatal flaw of the film’s protagonist, his ‘indifference’ to Craig Finlay’s visits and taunts, resulting in his fatal wounding in the film’s final sequence. Thus the operation of noise and sound works psychologically in the diegesis, particularly in its moments of intensity, as well as metaphorically. The film’s final sequence enables the viewer to muse on not only the quotidian aspects of everyday life but, at a more universal level, of what it means to do good and how to remain good.

Conclusion

Contemporary approaches to film scoring have been extended in recent decades. More complex scoring methods that integrate sound and music with the visual image, with each other and with the narrative are becoming increasingly common. The result is an intricately woven text that forms a unified whole. Experiencing Noise, it becomes apparent that music and sound are integrated in such a way as to comment on each other, on image and on the narrative. Both are active and crucial to the way in which this story is told: indeed, elements of sound are the story. An analysis of these thereby requires a horizontal approach to the film.

Noise is concerned with universal, humanistic issues about responsibility and human interaction. On this meta-level, the private contexts and individual psyche that is suggested by melodrama as representing dialectics (the opposing forces of social issues) are littered with allegorical references to what it is to be human. Rather than be relegated to the background or experienced as a mood amplifier or tension device, the music and its fusion with the ubiquitous high pitch frequency of McGahan’s tinnitus act in a similar way to a film noir voiceover. They provide an insight into the protagonist’s subjectivity as well as acting as a conceptual metaphor for the real-life structures that clutter our perception of the world around us. More than a partial view of life around us, Noise emphasises how individual physical capabilities (or lack thereof) provide a further filter on what we can and cannot experience. As such, in this contemporary take on the film noir, the divergence offered by sound and music obscures quite literally the viewers’ cinematic interpretations and their ability to solve the mystery. Metaphorically, McGahan’s inability to hear or to sense becomes our inability to decide, whether it be between right and wrong or good and evil; the lines become blurry and we are left to acknowledge that, without our senses, a soul can become very lost.

Bibliography


